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AUTHOR	Lewinski, Michael J.
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ABSTRACT

A high school teacher recounts his own literacy journey from a young child with an auditory perception problem, to a school-hating student, to a semi-literate Marine in Viet Nam, to a teacher of persons with disabilities. He notes that his literacy journey during the early years was characterized by immaturity, avoidance, and self doubt. He grew up in a family where reading and writing were not valued enough to be modeled and actively promoted. He did poorly in all school subjects and did not get along with other students. In the Marines he learned that he had a high IQ, but even with that knowledge, he did little to raise his literacy much above a functional level. With maturity, the development of self-confidence, help from others, and some luck, he was able to use those minimal literacy skills to transform himself from an illiterate person with learning disabilities into a literate teacher of persons with learning disabilities. (RS)

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SOME STUDENTS DON'T WANT TO READ

Michael J. Lewinski

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M Lewinski

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

CS 013 534

He was a little boy, small for his age throughout all of grade school. Even before he entered St. Therese's Catholic school, Michael knew he did not want to go to school. He didn't want to go to that large, three story, brownstone building that sat behind the church. He didn't even want to go to the public school down the street that was attended by his friends' older brothers and sisters.

"You know what?", said Tommy, as the two boys walked along and on the railroad tracks looking for slugs they could try in a gum machine, "My sister says I have to go to school pretty soon."

"I don't want to go to school," responded his companion. "I want to stay here and play. Let's get some stones and go see if there are some girl scouts in the woods we can throw them at."

Michael wanted to stay home and play with his friends. He wanted the familiar and comfortable. For this little boy, born at the end of the second world war, wandering in the woods, playing along the river. or collecting slugs on the railroad tracks seemed much more interesting than going off to learn the three R's. No one had to show him how to find interesting things in the University's dump at the edge of the woods. He and his friends found bottles, pictures, and all sorts of things they never encountered elsewhere. His mom and grandpa had taught Michael how to swim and fish even before he could remember. Running after pirates sailing down the river, or even smashing stones on the railroad tracks when the trains went by was quite preferable to sitting in a class with strangers all day.

He was a young boy, only five years old when he entered the first grade. That first morning Michael was assigned a seat and surely given some unfamiliar things to

do. There were routines to learn, but Michael was not yet ready for school routines. Part of the morning routine involved a bathroom break. Everybody lined up; boys on one side of the room and girls on the other. Two by two they walked down the hall to a stairway which led to the basement restrooms across from the cafeteria. Off the first landing of the stairs the little boy noticed a set of doors which led outside. As he made the turn on the landing Michael pushed his way past other children and rushed out the doors to freedom.

When he was outside, Michael ran as quickly as his little legs would carry him across the seemingly endless asphalt playground. On the other side of the fence at the street, he knew which way to head but was not sure how far away home was. He ran past the place where his father would get those wonderful coney dogs he would bring home for a treat. When he came to the railroad trestle which spanned Door Street he ran even faster for fear of some train coming along and falling off on top of him. He ran and ran until he was near the drug store where his mother would buy him a chocolate malt after trips to the dentist. Aunt Rose lived just around the corner from the drug store. Michael sought refuge. Aunt Rose, he knew, would let him stay and rest in a familiar place until he was ready to head towards home again.

Michael sat in their neighbor's car on Door Street crying. He never cared for Aunt Rose after that. She had betrayed him. "I don't want to go to school," pleaded Michael. "I don't like school. I want to stay home with you."

"You have to go," said the little boy's mother. Holding Michael on her lap she told him he needed to learn to read and write. "You will have fun," she said, "learning

math and science." Michael would have nothing to do with it. "If you don't come back in school with me, your father will give you a spanking when he gets home."

"I don't care!" cried Michael. "I don't want to go to school, and I won't."

"But it's the law. If you don't go to school," she said in desperation, "the police will come and get you and take you to jail."

The children were singing when the young lad was brought back into the room by the principal. The teacher showed Michael to his desk. That day he sat there crying and hoping this horrible day would end. It didn't for a long, long time.

Until he was finally allowed to quit school at 17, by threatening never to see his mother again if she wouldn't let him join the Marine Corps, Michael was always running away from school. When they were reading a story in his English class, he would sit at his desk, head down, day dreaming. When the first graders were learning their letters, Michael would get in trouble for flicking the small green, cardboard blocks off his desk at other students. When his peers were learning about chemical properties, this young man who had such a difficult time reading the words in his text would sit there and think about his friends and who they would threaten or beat up. When instruction was going on, it seemed as if Michael was always someplace else, looking out the window, or just doodling.

Michael didn't get along with most of the children at school. He was different. He didn't do very well in any of the subjects that were being taught. He always failed

his spelling tests. Math was a real challenge. With his poor hand/eye coordination printing and cursive were also challenging, and even his art projects came up short. Michael always feared being called upon for reading. That simply meant another chance for his classmates to laugh at him. This scrawny kid with the chipped front tooth and butch haircut never knew why he was different. He attributed it to how poor the family was. It would be decades before he would understand the genesis of his learning problem.

"Michael, come out here quickly," said the young mother.

When the little boy stepped out on the porch he saw what his mommy was so excited about. "It's a bahlimp, it's a bahlimp," he shouted out loudly. As he stood there jumping up and down watching the large dirigible pass directly overhead, not 500 feet off the ground, Michael did not hear his mother correcting him by enunciating bl-imp.

After the excitement had passed, Cleta said to her oldest son, "I have to go to the store now. I want you to stay in the yard. If you want something before I get back, ask your dad."

"Get some dirt for supper"

Perhaps, sensing a teaching moment, the young mother responded by pointing to her flower bed in front of the porch. "You have all the dirt you need right there. I don't have to buy any."

"No, I don't want that! I want some dirt we can have tonight."

"Well there it is," responded Cleta, pointing at the flower garden again.

"No! I want that sweet stuff we have after we eat."

"Oh, you mean desert."

"Ah ha, I want some dirt."

Cleta thought that Michael's talking problem would be fixed when he went to school. She knew what a wonderful job the nuns had done educating her. She had no idea what impact an auditory preception problem could have on learning.

Something just didn't seem right when he got the news in boot camp. His teachers had always told his mother that Michael was a smart boy. He also sometimes felt that he wasn't really the dumbest kid in school even though he had always done so poorly. Now the Marines were telling him that he had an IQ that was higher than just about everybody else's in his unit. With that news he could at least pretend that he was smart. It gave him the incentive to study for and pass the GED which he had promised his mother he would do.

Nobody would see the short, poorly written letters he would occasionally force himself to write home. When he went to radio school after boot camp, the young Marine did remarkably well in learning how to operate and maintain radio equipment.

In Viet Nam he carried around and read books by Ayn Rand. They were supposed to be the kinds of books smart people read. Besides, he enjoyed the stories. They seemed more acceptable than the comics or books about UFO's which he used to read as an adolescent.

The thinking Michael began doing after reading works like Anthem or Fountainhead led to the conclusion he never should have quit school. Visits to schools in Da Nang, where children practiced math by computing mortar trajectories, first suggested to the young Marine he might teach. After all, he could do some good as a teacher. He knew first hand what a mistake it was to quit school and to not try and learn when in school. Surely he could pass that message along to others who didn't like school.

Following his discharge from the Marine Corps Michael did nothing to raise his literacy much above a functional level. He could write with some effort, and had the ability to understand some of the things that he read if they were not too technical or filled with big, unfamiliar words. He could never teach however. That would mean going to college. No matter what the Marines had said, he knew he wasn't smart enough for that. That simply was a fact, until he attended a school for new life insurance agents in Chicago. When he finished first in his class and passed with ease the state tests for insurance licenses, Michael began to believe that maybe he really wasn't dumb. Perhaps he could learn if a real effort were made.

For a young man who was born and grew up during the forties and fifties, it did not seem right that his partner, a high school music teacher, should be better

educated. He found history interesting and thought perhaps he could become a social studies teacher. Within six months of his marriage, Michael was enrolled in a college of education at the University of Toledo. During his first quarter in the summer of '68, this high school dropout took a history course and learned a valuable lesson about learning; something had be done with the information if it is to be learned and used. After failing the mid-term, he literally memorized the second half of the text to pass the class.

In the following 31 years Michael traversed the gap between being semi-literate and literate by developing and following numerous learning strategies. He learned to more effectively decode words phonetically and built up a significant sight vocabulary. He started asking for help when something wasn't clear and began imitating models. He also learned to use mnemonic devices, interact with information, organize his resources, and distinguish what could and couldn't be known.

Postscript

My literacy journey during the early years seemed to have been characterized by immaturity, avoidance and self doubt. Growing up in a family with an oral tradition, where reading and writing were not valued enough to be modeled and actively promoted, I had little incentive for overcoming the problems associated with a specific learning disability. Given the experiences I had during the elementary, middle, and high school years, it is amazing that I learned to read and write at all.

I did acquire the most rudimentary literacy skills however. With maturity, the development of self-confidence, help from others, and a little bit of luck I was able to

use those minimal literacy skills to transform an illiterate person with learning disabilities into a literate teacher of persons with learning disabilities. Now all I have to do is figure out an effective way to help others comprehend the value of learning and staying in school.